

9 LIVES

This is a backcountry snowboarding story of how I lived to tell you about this backcountry snowboarding story. Usually people who make this many mistakes don't get the chance to tell the story, so here goes.

Yesterday, November 24th, was the first day of the 2001 season for me and I wanted to go backcountry. Baker and Crystal were opening up the 25th, but I didn't want to wait in long lift lines for tracked up rocks and my body needed conditioning that only earned turns can give.

I was going up to camp Muir at about 10,000ft on the S. side of Rainier solo or not. I knew the route well, knew it would be crowded and knew it had very little if any avalanche danger. I sound confident and cocky – I was. The night before my good buddy and touring partner Gorio called me and was in. Between the two of us we've done this tour over 40 times. I brought my compass, transceiver, probe, shovel, first aid/repair kit and enough food and clothes for the trip including an extra night if needed. If I had any concern at all it was of spending an extra night on the mountain, and even that was so faint I consciously didn't bring a map or wands knowing I could dig in and survive.

The trip from door to door is about 12 hours so I told Gorio I'd be at his house at 4am. We were at the Longmire gate at 630am and were told the gate probably would not open until 11am due to snow, though very little snow had fallen overnight. We had breakfast and debated between our options, but with most roads closed in and around Rainier our only option was to drive to Hood and ride there. I guess you could call it a lucky break but the gate opened at about 8am and we were in the Paradise parking lot getting ready by head up shortly after. While packing Gorio told me he had not really slept and forgot his transceiver (mistake #1), no biggy to me, my decision to go on was made without a second thought.

We were first on the mountain and broke trail as the wind and little bit of snow had wiped clean any signs of an up track. We were still in the trees and lower section of the mountain, but the wind was serious even at this elevation (avy clue #1), which meant it would be even more ferocious above tree line. At one point Gorio and I were together when a gust blew both of us 2ft back. Wishing I had a facemask we climbed on.

Our first stop was going to be an old roofless shelter at the top of the steepest section of the climb, about 1500-2000ft from the parking lot and 3000ft from Muir. As we approached the wind was in our face and several times we had to lean to the ground to hang on. We finally had to take our skis off and scramble. Two skiers we met in the parking lot, Jimmy and Sam, had caught up to us in the shelter. We were out of the wind, but without a roof there was a constant swirl of snow in the air. Any pack, glove or exposed hand was instantly covered or filled with snow. We ate and drank hot tea. Gorio and I were still in for going to Muir as Jimmy and Sam decided to head down and ski terrain less windy.

We made it about 200ft from the shelter and ran into some climbers on the way down, they had spent the night in tents at about 8000ft and said it was like camping in the jetstream. I was impressed. My spare pair of socks that I'd tied together around my face was not working, the two knots prevented my jacket from closing completely and they really didn't protect my exposed skin. Pressing on meant no exposed skin, so after about 10 minutes we turned back.

Our first turns were awesome as we were on the leeward side, though the wind had buffeted all sides,

this was a deep firm powder that was easy to board. By now we had 20 skiers, climbers and boarders in sight. The firm snow showed no signs of weakness and we did not plan on digging any pits (mistake #2).

Though neither of us had headed SE of the parking lot, we could see the parking lot and snow covered road (closed in winter) heading east out of it. All we had to do was make it back to the road and ski back to the lot. Plus, we could see other skiers touring in all directions, so we were not alone. On the way down Gorio spotted some avalanche debris (avy clue #2), the first we'd seen. After about 1000ft of turns we switched back and headed for more leeward slopes to the east. Gorio spotted a great line that was tucked in next to a top to bottom line of trees; we were at the top an hour later.

After windsurfing with our bodies at the top of the ridge and having lunch we rode down one at a time. I'd say we were still being fairly safe riding one at a time and keeping each other in site. In retrospect I was all too confident in the snow and my ability to react to anything the mountain could dish out. In fact I remember thinking that very thought only hours before. At the time I thought it I wondered if the mountain could sense my confidence. I would later regret that thought.

We were now in the ride to the bottom with as little hiking as possible mode. As with many of the volcanoes in early or late season this means keeping your board on at all costs (mistake #3). So we were heading SW trying to make as many turns while not losing elevation, maybe even hoping to keep a line that could deposit us back in the parking lot without anymore hiking. It's early season and I was pooped.

We were about 500 vertical feet above the parking lot and maybe a ½ mile east when we started working the beginnings of a creek. At first it was a wide opening and I made some steep turns just in front of Gorio, nothing moved. We regrouped and looked at the terrain trap below as the creek got narrower and the slopes into it steeper.

I could see a way out across a 100ft wide mini-bowl, nothing that big at all. It was right next to the steep slope I had just come down. I didn't even look up to see what could cut loose on me or look down to really see where I would go if it did (mistake #4). It was a classic avy slope ready to rip and I was too close to safety and too cocky to even see it.

I had just entered it, trying to cut a high line straight across it's belly (mistake #5) putting as much pressure as my 230 lbs of body and gear could put on it still only thinking of making the high point 100 ft away without hiking.

At the same time Gorio yelled "slide" I saw the snow in front of me start to move. I was only about 5 ft in and it looked like only the top 8-12 inches was moving, but for sure a big island of snow. At this point I thought I was still in control and there was no panic. I instantly turned my board back toward the direction I had come and the moving snow forced me to sit though I had hoped to keep moving as I had in many slides before. After about 20 ft I realized I was going to get forced into a narrow crux of the creek and I realized this was going to be big. Everything was happening so fast and at the same time in slow motion, I didn't try to pull my ripcord that releases my board, or take off my pack, both would be anchors and all avy training says to ditch the gear. About this time the secondary wave of snow from above, that had a 2-3 ft crown at its deepest point in a 20 ft wide section, hit me from behind with speed. This is the last time Gorio saw me as I was buried from this point on. I traveled the next 40+ feet face down thinking I would be going down a long way not really knowing what was around the bend in the creek. I was still calm considering I was buried. I tried to reach my board to pull the rip cord but it was uphill. Before I knew it things were coming to a stop, I just managed to get my right hand in front of my face and my left hand about 10 inches away.

The first 10 seconds:

Oh my god, Oh my god. Keep calm, everything you've learned says to conserve oxygen and keep calm. I was calm for one second, and shitting my pants the next.

My goggles were still on and I could see, there was light. I tried to move but the snow was cement. My body was stretched out to the fullest, as my board was an anchor with my body and pack being pulled downhill. My head was face down and well below my feet. I knew which way was up. I tried like hell to free myself, to push up, but each time the effort would take up all the oxygen and I felt like I was hyperventilating. Then I tried to yell "Gorio" "Gorio" with the same effect.

I relaxed, regained my breath, and somehow felt calm for just a few seconds.

The next 20 seconds:

I realized Gorio did not have a transceiver...did he have his probe??? I knew he had his shovel but how deep was I. I know from experience that avy snow is cement and digging someone out by yourself is compounded many times with each foot of snow that is on top of you. But how the f***! would he find me without a transceiver??? And if he doesn't have his probe forget it, he has to have a probe? We're in a hole, no one saw us and there was not enough time to get help. Fifteen minutes is all I have, all Gorio has to save me.

Is this it? Am I going to die right here? What about Sara, Rielly and Ivy? F***!! I try to push again and bring my left hand closer to my face, which fills my little air pocket and mouth with snow resulting in a double dose of panic.

The next 2 minutes:

All I can think about is my family. Reilly is 2 and Ivy is 4. How could I miss all the signs and die so early. All my backcountry experiences, training, first descents and shit talking and now I'm cemented a half mile from my car. I'm a f***ing idiot! F***!! They won't find me until next year, it will just keep snowing and sliding and getting deeper and deeper.

I try to call out to Gorio again, but my breath has melted the snow, which is now starting to freeze around my head, greatly reducing the oxygen flow.

The last 3-4 minutes:

I've given up hope of being saved 100%. I think my goggles are starting to fog as it's getting darker and darker. All I can think about is my wife Sara and kids, the best kids in the world. I know I'll be hurting them, hurting the rest of my family and friends. I think how I'm not going to be able to teach my kids how to love the mountains, and I think they will hate the mountains. I don't want them to hate the mountains.

I'm sad, I'm mad, I'm calm then I'm fighting again.

It's dark but I'm still conscious.

I believe in god in my own way, and I ask for his help. It was weird; it felt like I was asking for my kids and not for me. I felt so sorry for them.

Then I hear it, muffled and about 10 or so feet away.

"Luke" "Luke"

Oh Shit, Oh Shit... It's Gorio, f***in A it's Gorio. I could only manage one or two Gorio's, not sure if he heard me or not but just like that with a heart attack of excitement I knew I was going to be dug out.

The next 10 minutes:

It seemed like it only took 10 seconds, could have been a minute I don't know, but Gorio got my face free and I gasped for air screaming "you saved my life, you saved my life". Gorio says I was pretty out of it saying all kinds of shit, all I remember is feeling euphoric and telling Gorio how he saved my life. Gorio was moving fast as we were still in a very dangerous place. It took a minute to dig out my board and get it off my feet when Gorio accidentally knocked some snow in my face blocking my breath. I yelled "Gorio, Gorio my face" as my arms and head were still locked in place. The helplessness was overwhelming.

The strange thing was my goggles were not fogged, I guess the no fog stuff I put on the inside and outside the night before worked and it was my brain that went dark.

I wanted to hug Gorio and Gorio wanted to get the f*** out of dodge, we had to hike back up the slide path to get out, as below us was an even bigger terrain trap.

My head was pounding from the lack of oxygen, I had no more strength left but the thought of being ripped by another slide and being able to see my family again after giving up hope was more than enough motivation to climb out. Still had one last 20ft section of exposed slope to climb across until we were in a safe zone, Gorio repacked his gear in another safe zone across the creek while I slowly made my way to it even though I was going as fast as I could. Once there I collapsed as I had been climbing the entire time since being set free. Once Gorio made it I went back into my "you saved my life" speech, hugs etc.

Twenty minutes later we were in the parking lot.

I'm still shaking my head. Asking questions. Felling so happy to be alive, to have a second chance to be with my family. And I can't explain it, but feeling depressed and everything in between.

Gorio said he saw the second wave coming and it hit me hard, he went to a safe spot 20 ft away and grabbed his shovel and probe and assembled them both without having to take his moist gloves off, saving time. From the point he last saw me he probed down the narrow creek avy path until he saw a piece of my ski binding on the outside of my pack, the size of a dime, sticking out. The size of a dime! In 5-6 minutes he had my face exposed to air, beautiful air.

His experience was as traumatic as mine; only difference is he had oxygen. He was thinking about how he was going to have to tell Sara about me, how shitty would that of been?

Sara said she wouldn't have been mad at Gorio, it was my decisions that got me into the mess, so she would have been mad at me.

So many times I've cheated death, before my kids I needed to get that rush to feel alive. I'd get it in the mountains, riding bikes, anything to get the rush and feeling invincible. Many times I've paid the price

with pain, coming close to the edge and living to tell about it. For the most part I've mellowed out since having kids.

Yesterday I paid the ultimate price, I crossed the line so far I was dead in my own mind.

It's still too close to really know what kind of perspective this will give me, but guaranteed, perspective will be gained.

To my family, Sara, Ivy and Reilly; I love you more than anything. More than solo trips, more than first descents and more than life itself.

To my family and Sara's family who would have had to deal with the mess, help raise my kids and the entire trauma this would of caused you, I'm sorry.

To Gorio, what can I say or do? For my family and for myself thank you. I'll ask the backcountry community what the going rate is for full body retrieval and life saving while putting yourself at risk. And to you I'm sorry for putting up my blinders.

To anyone who reads this and travels in the backcountry; read the signs, they're out there if you look for them. Take the training, learn from the training and use the training. Always bring you're tools; transceiver, probe, shovel and most importantly your brain. This was a teeny tiny slide I was in practically next to the parking lot. I could have been swept down into a creek hole and buried 20 ft deep or over a cliff, through rocks or trees and all totally helpless.

I'm not going to stop living life, but I plan on making sure I'm around to enjoy it with my family and friends as long as humanly possible.

I still have a few of those 9 lives left, but I plan on saving the rest for a long, long time.

Loving life,

Luke Edgar